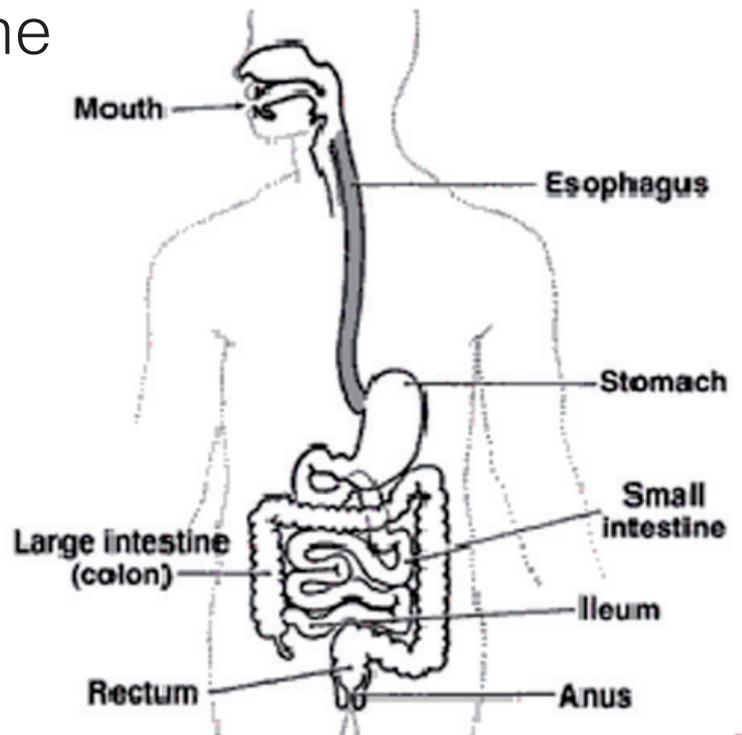


# Living with IBS

## What is irritable bowel syndrome?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common digestive system problem. It affects 10-20% of people in the UK at some time in their lives, but many feel too embarrassed to talk about it.



### What are the symptoms of IBS?

Symptoms can vary but they usually include:

- a change in your bowel habits, such as bouts of diarrhoea and/or constipation, or needing to go to the toilet more often or more urgently
- pain or discomfort in your abdomen (belly)
- bloating.

We do not yet understand exactly what causes IBS. But one important factor seems to be that your large intestine becomes more sensitive. Physical triggers or emotional stress can then cause spasms in your digestive system.

IBS is not a dangerous condition and it will not make you more likely to develop more serious bowel problems.

### Why does stress make IBS worse?

IBS often starts and gets worse when you are under stress. Having it can also be very stressful in itself.

Stress is a normal part of life and is all to do with what happens to and around you, how you see those events and how you cope with them. When your body is under stress, it responds in many ways and this affects different parts of the body. Your 'fight or flight' response – which gets your body ready to run away from or fight a physical threat – kicks in. This tends to upset things such as your digestive system which do not help you to run away or fight.

Traumatic experiences when you were a young child can also make your gut more sensitive and this can last into your adult life.

## How can I manage my symptoms?

Although there is no cure for IBS, you can control it by making some changes to your diet and lifestyle. Sometimes medication can also help. You may need to try a combination of things to see which works best for you.

### Change your diet

IBS is not usually caused by intolerance to specific foods, so it is important that you eat a balanced and varied diet, with plenty of fluids. Do not cut out foods unless you are sure they make your symptoms worse. You may be able to spot what helps and what does not by keeping a diary for a few weeks, writing down what you eat and drink and when, and any symptoms you have.

Some people find that eating more fibre, which you find in foods such as beans, bran and prunes, helps their symptoms. Others find it makes them worse. Your symptoms can also be made worse by:

- caffeine, which you find in things such as coffee, tea, chocolate and energy drinks like Red Bull
- fizzy drinks, including cola, lemonade and sparkling water, particularly if you have problems with bloating
- alcohol
- fatty foods, including fried foods, pastries and pies, creamy desserts and chocolate
- dairy products, if you are sensitive to them
- sweeteners in chewing gum and diet foods.

### Eat well

IBS symptoms are often related to when and how, rather than what, you eat. For example, you may get them when you eat very quickly or you have a big meal after a long time without eating.

- Eating regular meals, including a healthy breakfast, helps to keep your body and your bowel habits balanced.
- You may also find it helpful to give yourself time to relax, enjoy your food and chew it well. Bloating is sometimes caused by eating quickly and swallowing air with your food.

- Try having meals at the table and not working while you eat.

## **Do not smoke**

Smoking can make IBS symptoms worse.

## **Change your toilet habitst**

It may help to plan your mornings before you need to leave home, so you give yourself plenty of time to use the loo without rushing. When you are on the loo, try to relax and resist the urge to strain.

## **Understand what is going on**

Ask your doctor any questions you have about your IBS. It is particularly important to have clear information because any worries or fears you have about your symptoms will make you think about them more and make them seem worse.

## **Find out what is causing your stress and work out how to change things**

You may find it helpful to write down the things that are causing you stress and to think of how you could change them, even if it is only in a small way. This might include:

- planning ahead how to tackle tricky situations
- working out the things that are most important or urgent and doing them first
- letting go of the things that you cannot change
- not asking too much of yourself
- asking for help when it would be useful.

## **Speak up for yourself**

People who find it hard to tell others their needs and feelings are more likely to have IBS symptoms. You may find it helpful to become more assertive and speak up for yourself. Some good places to start are:

- Telling people how you are feeling and not pretending that everything is ok.
- Deciding when to say 'no' and tactfully but firmly sticking to your decision.
- Saying 'I' more often. For example: "I get upset when..." rather than "You shouldn't..."

## **Learn ways of looking after yourself**

- Find ways of relaxing that suit you. It could be listening to music, spending time with friends or treating yourself to a long soak in the bath.
- When you are feeling stressed, try pausing for just a moment and taking a long, deep, slow breath.
- Try to notice when you are being harsh or critical with yourself and see if you can treat yourself more gently.

- Try doing regular exercise. This helps your bowels to work better and reduces stress and tension. You are more likely to stick with a type of exercise you enjoy and which fits into your routine.
- Try to notice if you are thinking the worst and seeing if there might be some other way of thinking about the situation.
- If anxiety is a big problem for you, or you have had some type of trauma, consider getting specialist psychological help. Your gastroenterologist or GP can advise you about this.

## Become more confident

If you have been avoiding situations because you are concerned your IBS will cause you embarrassment, think about gradually building up your confidence to go back to them. For example, if you have been avoiding going on the Tube, you might want to start with short journeys.

It may be that your fears are not entirely based in truth. For example, if you have diarrhoea, you may worry that there have been times when you have only just made it to the loo and that you could not have held on for a moment longer. Test whether or not this is true: next time you need to dash to the loo, sit down when you get there and see if you can hold on for a while longer.

## Useful contact numbers

### The IBS Network

This is a national charity with lots of advice about IBS.

Tel: 0114 272 3253 Email: [info@theibsnetwork.org](mailto:info@theibsnetwork.org) Website: <http://theibsnetwork.org>

### King's Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

This is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. The PALS office is located on the ground floor of the Hambleton Wing, near the main entrance on Bessemer Road - staff will be happy to direct you.

Tel: 020 3299 3601 Fax: 020 3299 3626 Email: [kch-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.pals@nhs.net)

### Further reading

Understanding Irritable Bowel Syndrome by Simon Darnley and Barbara Millar (Wiley, 2003)

Written by Dr Jane Hutton, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychological Medicine, King's College Hospital, April 2012

### The full range of IMPARTS booklets can be found at:

[www.kcl.ac.uk/ioppn/depts/pm/research/imparts/Self-help-materials.aspx](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/ioppn/depts/pm/research/imparts/Self-help-materials.aspx)